

PATTERNS OF MISCOMMUNICATION IN  
CONTEMPORARY EAST-CENTRAL  
EUROPEAN CINEMA

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Editors

DENISA-ADRIANA OPREA  
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## INTRODUCTION

East-Central Europe (ECE) is as much a geographical area as a political idea. Its spatial coordinates have shifted in alignment with the logistics of the different ideologies which, over time, have placed the region's delineation at the core of their program. According to Miłosz (2019; quoted in Nowak, p. 43), it is also a moral idea based on a certain type of historical imagination and shared memory, of “pain and humiliation”, most recently built around the Second World War and the Communist dictatorships that were established in many of the ECE countries after the end of the conflict. Its hallmarks evolved in time, from linguistic diversity and nationalistic disputes to a laboratory in which to brew alternative scenarios of European modernity, showcasing the cultural and political dynamics of the region in its relationship with Western-centric perspectives (von Puttkamer, 2015).

According to von Puttkamer (2015), a historiography of East Central Europe has recently emerged which goes beyond political biases, showcasing a strong cultural studies orientation through “its primary interest in the productive and destructive dimensions of cultural entanglements in imperial and post-imperial contexts”. Alongside this first orientation, a communication studies-informed methodology might contribute to deciphering the implicit *lingua franca* that has developed from the “forced ‘togetherness’” (Iordanova, 2003, p. 13) of the otherwise fragmented ethnocultural milieus that compose East-Central Europe – a *lingua franca* which is, quite paradoxically, preponderantly nonverbal and exists despite the fiercely maintained linguistic diversity of the region. Assuredly, the intricate web of interdependencies between the ECE countries requires concepts that broaden the spectrum between the monolithic extremes of communication and non-communication, mainly those of

*incommunication* (frustration over the perceived failure to communicate or the mistaken belief of having been understood), *miscommunication* (failure to communicate ideas or intentions successfully) and *acomunication* (hierarchized communication that disregards the other's intellectual and identitarian autonomy), as defined by Wolton (2013) or Dacheux (2015).

This volume brings together papers presented during the *Patterns of Miscommunication in Contemporary East-Central European Cinema* International Conference, co-organized in September 2023 by the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) and the National University of Theatre and Film I.L. Caragiale (UNATC). We started from the premise that all films, regardless of their context of production and their varying level of anchoring in a certain identifiable reality, can be interpreted as symbolic constructions referring to a cluster of meanings conveyed by a specific society at a moment of its existence (Casetti, 2004). Thus, by analyzing from multiple standpoints contemporary audiovisual productions made in ECE countries, we can see a mosaic of the region's most pressing issues. Being a medium of mass culture as well as a complex form of language, film has often been read through communication lenses. Different studies have approached topics such as intercultural communication (Mariati et al., 2022), non-verbal communication (Stratton, 2017), and family communication (Kramer, 2013) in films. Nonetheless, although particularly pertinent for reading and interpreting the complex relationships within and between ECE countries as rendered through film, miscommunication is still an underexplored topic. Our conference aimed to fill this gap by inquiring about the main variations of cinematic discourses developed around the issue of miscommunication, their wider meaning, and how they reflect a common imaginary for this part of Europe.

Several axes of investigation, which form thematic clusters and are often apprehended together, run through the contributions to this volume.

The series of chapters is opened by **Milana Vujkov**'s reflection on the emotional "paralysis" that took hold of her while she prepared to publish on her blog a review of an impactful recent film about the post-Yugoslav conflict, namely *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (directed by Jasmila Žbanić, 2020). The author delivers a powerful meditation on self-censorship and dilemmas of engagement in polarized public discourse within post-conflict societies while recounting an intimate, deeply moving, yet sober journey across the shattering memories of life in Serbia in the

1990s. An instinctual reaction against a state of *re-traumatization*, her reluctance to engage in a public debate marked by discord and denial is not without raising the issue of the consequences of silence, which is detrimental to opening communication channels between different nations and political options. Most importantly, Vujkov's text also provides a deeply engrossing meta-framework for all subsequent contributions, problematizing the role of film criticism and film studies in the discourse on (and generating from) East-Central Europe.

Accordingly, the first thread this volume seeks to investigate is the one related to *the historical and socio-geographical situatedness of audiovisual archives*, which have been increasing in East-Central European productions since the advent of digital technologies and have introduced a new methodology for confronting discord-laden narratives and identity struggles in the region. **Alexandru Sterian** develops an argument concerning the function of audiovisual archives within essayistic documentaries and their relative truth value, which can be creatively tampered with by the filmmaker in order to deliver a more impactful message. Sterian takes as an example Radu Jude's 2017 *The Dead Nation*, a collage film that superimposes three temporally and geographically distinct layers of meaning through image, voice-over, and sound, in order to create an intellectually ambitious and sensorially inciting meditation on the complex picture in which the Romanian Holocaust is embedded.

**Liri-Alienor Chapelan** follows a similar path when plunging into the intricacies of employing audiovisual archives in contemporary film works which have to integrate into certain communicational and aesthetic paradigms. The author mirrors the strategies used on the one hand by Serghei Loznitsa in *Babi Yar. Context* (2021), and on the other by Radu Jude in *The Exit of the Trains* (2020) – two montage documentaries that aim to visually assert the perpetration of the Holocaust in Ukraine and Romania. Chapelan analyzes the distinctions existing between their digital treatment of the archives, the (anti)spectacular character they confer to the images, and the faith in the narrativizing, respectively critical function of archival material these two usages reveal.

Beyond the Holocaust, other major traumatic events apprehended by several of the articles composing this volume are the recent war in Ukraine and the conflicts that ravaged the post-Yugoslav space throughout the 1990s.

**Claudia Fiorito** delves into contemporary Ukrainian fiction films, such as Nariman Aliev's *Homeward* (2019), Taras Dron's *Blindfold* (2020),



and Natalya Vorozhbyt's *Bad Roads* (2022), and also into the Russian documentary *Broken Ties* by Andrei Loshak (2022). She investigates the war's impact on intergenerational dynamics, with family units often finding themselves isolated, broken, and ideologically divided, both in Ukraine and Russia. Linguistic or ideological discords and historical-political factors are all sources of miscommunication, fueling the anguish, uncertainty, and despair continually experienced by the protagonists.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's meditations on representability, **Mariana Hebling** explores the issues raised by the cinematic depiction of the battlefield experience and its effects in two post-Yugoslav films – Alen Drljević's *Men Don't Cry* (2017) and Srđan Keča's *A Letter to Dad* (2011). The author discusses the specific means used by the two directors – such as hybridization, disrupted temporalities, or allegory – to reconcile their traumatic memories and turn them into a symbolic narrative that can be understood and transmitted. She details how the two films deny aestheticized reconstructions or totalizing explanations while attempting to come to terms with the past without forgetting or reliving it traumatically.

The post-Yugoslav conflict is also the topic of **Irina Trocan's** contribution, which maps complex and interrelated aspects: the role of the broadcasting media, which fueled hate which in turn fueled an increasingly brutal war; the tropes used in international co-productions on the fall of Yugoslavia – for example, the presence of certain types of characters or stock situations, such as the confused or naïve protagonist who gradually gains awareness; the issue of gender and its role in experiencing and narrating war, from the attribution of feminine traits to the vulnerable victims, women or not, to the instrumentation of atrocities such as war rape. Following these general reflections, Trocan delves into the representation of women in films such as *A Perfect Day* (directed by Fernando León de Aranoa, 2015) or *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (directed by Jasmila Žbanić, 2020), highlighting the disbalanced communication situations (or *acommunication*) existing in times of war, to the perpetual disfavor of women.

Trocan's text introduces the reader to another major thematic frame of the present volume, namely *representational strategies of female characters*.

Drawing on the French communication theory concept of *incommunication*, **Denisa-Adriana Oprea** examines the symbolic positioning of the female leading characters in two scenes from Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), respectively *Beyond the Hills* (2012),

through the prism of graphic blocking. She showcases that the metaphorically sacrificial position that the two young women are made to adopt in the two scenes, correlated with their silence or mere interference with the other characters, symbolizes female traumatic status within the surveillance societies depicted by both films. It also poses incommunication as an element that, on the one hand, might preserve one's inner freedom, since in this type of society one cannot trust anybody and, on the other hand, torments and alienates the individual, since the need to genuinely connect with the other and its actual impossibility can lead to mental alienation.

**Klaudia Rachubińska** delves into Agnieszka Smoczyńska film *The Silent Twins* (2022), a creative rendition of the biographical story of two middle-class Black girls who refused to speak to anyone but each other from early childhood onwards, creating a personal vortex in which their family as well as compassionless state structures – hospital, police, internment facilities – were caught trying to unravel their mystery. Starting from Jack Halberstam and Bonnie Honig's perspectives on anti-social femininity, the author explores the complicated political ramifications of representing feminine withdrawal as a strategy of resistance and ultimately, of engagement on different terms than those set by patriarchal society. Rachubińska frames her film analysis within the wider context of what the author considers to be Polish women's own "refusal arc" during the last decade, especially in relation to proposed modifications of the abortion law, and finds reasons to hope for a surge in sorority and grassroot militancy.

Moving now to the interrelated issue of the construct of maleness, the protagonist of Cristian Mungiu's *R.M.N.* is, from **Lucia Chicoș**' point of view, an epitome of patriarchal masculinity in crisis. His patriarchal embeddedness causes problems in his intimate life and fuels his xenophobic behavior in the community. Chicoș also analyzes the portrayal of the leading female character in *R.M.N.* and astutely puts forward Mungiu's effort to depart from more conservative female representations, over-present in post-2000 Romanian cinema. Despite the progressiveness of his intentions, Mungiu falls, in Chicoș' opinion, into the traps of positive representation, eventually obtaining a rather superficial, pop version of feminist concepts that do not display a thorough theoretical absorption. Chicoș also opens in her text a rich field of investigation, as she reflects upon the pedagogically challenging question of how to teach film-directing students to create ethical representations of *otherness*.